

## **The politics of climate change Should we trust a novelist on global warming?**

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Tonight at the Hotel Nikko in San Francisco, members of the Platinum Circle of the Independent Institute will have the privilege, at \$10,000 per table, to hear a fiction writer talk about one of the pressing issues of our time: global warming. "State of Fear," the latest techno thriller by Michael Crichton, author of the science-fiction fantasy "Jurassic Park," inspired the theme of this evening's talk, "States of Fear: Science or Politics?"

If you belong to the Platinum Circle, or to the lesser Gold or Silver Circles -- or simply paid \$25 as a member of the Independent Institute or World Affairs Council, co-sponsors of the event -- expect the author and a "panel of distinguished scientists" to lash out at the widely accepted notion among the vast majority of scientists that human activity is contributing to a warming planet, and that business as usual -- doing nothing about rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere -- will make things worse.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a U.N.-sponsored group of more than 2,000 scientists from more than 100 countries, has concluded that human activity is a key factor in elevated carbon-dioxide levels and rising temperatures and sea levels that could prove catastrophic for tens of millions of people living along Earth's coastlines. In 2003, the American Geophysical Union, an international scientific research group with more than 35,000 members, declared, "Human activities are increasingly altering the Earth's climate." Similar declarations came from the American Meteorological Society, the American Academy for the Advancement of Science and the National Academy of Sciences.

These conclusions underscore research by Naomi Oreskes, a science historian at UC San Diego, who reviewed 928 abstracts of peer-reviewed articles on climate change published in scientific journals between 1993 and 2003 and could not find a single one that challenged the scientific consensus that human-caused global warming is real.

Crichton has read a lot about global warming for his latest novel. So he says in the author's note to "State of Fear." He acknowledges that "Atmospheric carbon dioxide is increasing, and that human activity is the probable cause." He also agrees that the planet is warming, but argues that because part of this is due to natural cycles, "Nobody knows how much of the present warming trend might be man-made," and that therefore, "Before making expensive policy decisions on the basis of climate models, I think it is reasonable to require that those models predict future temperatures accurately for a period of 10 years. Twenty would be better." That requirement is equivalent to mandating that the medical profession predict exactly which smokers will develop lung cancer before subjecting the tobacco companies to health-protecting regulations. As a physician, Crichton should know better.

Crichton's position is increasingly in the minority. In the face of the overwhelming conclusions of scientists, he has placed himself in the bizarre position of comparing them to those in the racist eugenics movement, which drew "support from leading scientists, politicians, and celebrities around the world" during its heyday in the early 20th century before it was discredited. Crichton's implication is that something similar will happen with climate change. But if he wants to equate bad science with what people widely believe, why not attack the statement that the Earth is round, or the theory that matter is composed of atoms? Given the author's odd comparison, one wonders why the respected World Affairs Council would choose to sponsor Crichton's presentation, and sign onto publicity calling "State of Fear" "a landmark, both cautionary and prophetic." Its policy forums would be put to better use by understanding why Crichton is the darling of the global-warming skeptics, and why the work of those skeptics is often funded by Exxon and other energy companies.

For his part, the millionaire author, cocooned by an ever-shrinking group of scientists, uses his minority position to cast himself as a brave man shouting into an ill wind. "Everyone has an agenda," he writes in "State of Fear." "Except me." This is a strange statement for a man who accepted an invitation to testify from Sen. James M. Inhofe, the Oklahoma Republican who is heavily supported by oil and gas interests, and who asked on the Senate floor: "Could it be that man-made global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people?" In the next breath, the senator answered his own question: "It sure sounds like it." At the Sept. 28 hearing of the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee, chaired by Inhofe, a puzzled Sen. James Jeffords, independent of Vermont, asked, "Why are we having a hearing that features a fiction writer as our key witness?" One answer: Despite his claim to the contrary, Crichton's "wait 20 years" recommendation is highly political, and in perfect synch with the senator from Oklahoma.

Crichton's political agenda, hidden behind his shroud of pseudoscientific "impartiality," is a convenient distraction for what is clearly a deeper motive. Fess up, Dr. Crichton, you're a writer of "pulse-pounding" novels. Tonight at the Hotel Nikko, tell the truth to the Platinum Circle: You want to sell as much fiction as possible.

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